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Why Can't Homeless Addicts Get Help too?

Rachael Causland

Imagine that you lose everything in life, your house, family, friends and most likely your job too which leaves you alone on the street and at the lowest point in your life you find that the only way you feel ok is when you are high or drunk. Then it gets to such a bad point that your body physically cannot function without being intoxicated, but you're homeless, so there's nothing you can do to stop this cycle, this is the reality for many people who are on the streets today. These people who suffer from addictions and homelessness have it harder because they don't have the resources necessary to get the help they need for their addiction, whether this be due to financial issues or even the fact that they don't have the support system from friends and family that other people might have. This leads to many people either overdosing and dying, or if they did get help because they don't have a strong support system it is very common for these people to relapse and continue in the cycle of addiction. People are also often thrown in jail instead of being sent to treatment facilities, this country treats addicts more like criminals than people who need help, which is something that needs to change and some states are starting to work towards that. These problems, while not easily solved, need to be addressed, and these people not only need but deserve the help that other addicts can get in facilities. Testoni, a psychology professor at the University of Padova conducted a study and illustrates that the reason this issue is so serious and deep is because these homeless individuals report that they not only start using drugs and

drinking more after they became homeless but they are also using it as a way of coping with homelessness and keeping themselves from committing suicide. (Testoni 2018).

Not only do these people use alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism, there are also greater chances of different types of groups becoming addicted more or using a specific type of drug. David Hampton, a recovering addict who is also a certified addiction expert, alongside with Murry, who is very adamant about spreading addiction awareness, shows statistics that state $\frac{1}{3}$ of homeless women are abusing heroin and crack cocaine, but the even scarier thing is that addiction affects homeless adolescents too. They also tell us that these children, ages usually from 12 to 17, are even more likely to be homeless than an adult, and 71% of these homeless adolescents report having a substance abuse disorder (Murray 2019). This issue runs much deeper than anyone has even thought of because these homeless people don't really have anyone looking out for them so they are forced to deal with this illness alone, which can lead to people making exceedingly rash decisions and the current way that people like this are dealt with is by getting thrown in jail for even the smallest drug or alcohol related charge. This country shouldn't treat addicts as criminals but as people with a disease that they can't treat on their own. While many jails do include some sort of addiction help, it's usually more just like AA or NA meetings than actual rehab which only extends to the time that they are incarcerated instead of following through, and if someone has to detox they are often forced to just ride it out instead of getting the medical detoxes that are available to people in a rehab facility. Also depending on the drug or how long

they have been using, detox can be fatal in some cases, meaning some of these people who are put in jail have to unsafely detox, which can cause death in some cases. Many people don't even get to make it to detox though. Hunter, one of the master-leveled licensed therapists in a dual-diagnosis residential treatment center in Ohio explains how overdosing is the biggest reason for injury-related deaths in the US, resulting in one out of three deaths from homeless individuals under the age of 45. (Hunter 2019). Numbers such as this are extremely common especially in urban areas like Philadelphia, Chicago Pittsburgh or Detroit, in a study done in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, O'Toole, an MD from the Johns Hopkins University of Medicine concluded that 78.3% of the homeless people asked reported using significantly more drugs and alcohol since becoming homeless, more so in Philadelphia than Pittsburgh too. (O'Toole 2011). Yet the biggest issue isn't the number of people who are addicted, it's that the people in this situation are stuck there and don't have the resources to pull themselves back from their addiction and in turn even their homelessness or they are wrongly thrown in jail for a medical ailment in which they need help with.

This is an issue that cannot be easily "fixed," but there are many steps that can and should be taken to help lessen this blow that these people are suffering from. There are already some programs in place to help low-income or homeless people, like some rehab centers offer scholarships, and there are facilities geared towards people who otherwise couldn't afford treatment. While some rehab centers will accept you regardless of your financial situation like these low-income facilities, some centers offer

scholarships. These scholarships work somewhat like a college scholarship would be like, the people will go and apply for a scholarship and tell the rehab why they should be able to get help and then the center will choose a certain amount of people to be accepted. Yet in an interview with someone who directly works with homeless addicts in Philadelphia, he informed me that in Philadelphia no one will be turned away from treatment due to homelessness (F. Mount, personal communications, October 24th, 2020). Although these programs are a great start, I think things like this should be more readily available, and scholarships should be a possibility in more treatment centers. There should also be more programs like the on-site health house in Baltimore City, Maryland. Dr. Lashley, a professor at Towson University tells us that at this house, which includes a 500-bed facility and a full continuum of care for homeless men that struggle with addiction, while the people who are accepted into this program have to go through screening and cannot have any type of warrants for their arrest or violent crime charges on their record. (Lashley 2018). This house welcomes a variety of men whether they're walking in off the street or were court ordered treatment and many other situations, they have few requirements too, besides a non-violent or clean record. Dr. Lashley also explains the men must be over the age of 18 and be physically fit enough to partake in program activities including work therapy- (Lashley 2018). I think more on-site houses like this should be in cities to help get these people treated and reintegrated back into society. If more places like this were out there more of these people would get help and that doesn't just help the individuals, once these people come out of these programs and get reintegrated into society they can become productive citizens, which in turn helps everyone in one way or another. I think there

should also be regulations on the scholarships, state funded rehab centers should have to give scholarships to a certain amount of people a year, this will help move people off of the streets and into treatment to start the process of getting them back into society. Also every state run facility should have scholarships available as a way for anyone to apply for regardless of their situation.

I don't think these solutions will solve this wicked problem, but it will lower overdose death rates, the homeless population, overcrowding in prisons, and even crime. Additionally people who are charged with small drug or alcohol charges should have to go to an assessment center, where a person is evaluated and then a board of professionals determine what kind of treatment a person should get, and if it is determined that a person has an addiction they should have to go to rehab instead of jail, but in cases where more than just something like a possession charge is present, like a DUI, then people should be assessed and, if they have a problem, should go to rehab before being sent to jail, and they should get a smaller sentence if they complete the program and continue their recovery. This would help people significantly because addicts are often put in jail where they still aren't getting all the help they need, and they often relapse due to drugs being in the jails or not having any sort of treatment after being released. Another thing that would help would be if there were more outreach groups specifically for finding addicts and getting them help, in Philadelphia there are outreach groups that drive around and try to get people to go and get some sort of treatment for their addiction. These groups, who mainly consist of volunteers, split their

cities up and drive around a number of streets to find people who are sleeping out in parks or on benches and they bring them to a shelter when they will get assessed and the treatment they need, medical or with addiction. If there were groups like this in more cities then more people would be getting help and eventually there will be less people on the streets because they will be integrated back into society.

I think the main reason that this issue is so large is because in the US addiction is seen more as a crime than something that people need help with or a disease, therefore there is a huge stigma around addicts and also many of them have their lives heavily altered because of some type of small drug or alcohol related charges. Although this stigma is beginning to get smaller, in recent news multiple states have made recreational marijuana legal and it has been decriminalized in many states from years before, which even though isn't a physically addictive drug, it shows that the stigma about it is lessening. Also in other news, the state of Oregon became the first to decriminalize hard drugs, which means that people who are caught with small amounts of hard drugs will not be put in jail for it, although I think instead these people should be shown towards treatment centers or NA meetings. AAlso addiction hits the homeless community so hard because they are, as Testoni, a psychology professor at the University of Padova told us, using these drugs and alcohol as a way to stay alive (Testoni 2018), although when they start to use it brings a whole new truck-load of issues for that person, and they are then stuck with these issues and forced to deal with them alone because they are financially unstable. These issues also affect everyone

and the country as a whole, because homelessness and addiction go hand in hand as shown earlier in many cases homelessness causes addiction, so when the statistics of our homeless go up this reflects badly on the country as a whole, the unemployment rate also goes up because of this. This issue also increases crime rates and an alarming amount of people are dying from overdoses every day which is also not a good look on the country, but by implementing some, if not all of the programs that assist these people in affording or getting treatment, people are not just getting the help they need from this vicious disease but many of these depressing numbers of people being homeless and dying will lessen. This can also help improve the economy because a large number of our unemployed people are homeless, if they get rehabilitated into society it will improve the economy and lower unemployment rates and other saddening statistics. I also think this will lessen the stigma about addicts being criminals and more people will see that they have a real issue that is terrible and hard to control alone, they need professional help just like a person with any other type of severe physical or mental ailment.

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